



On Thin Ice by [disneylover3212008](#)

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Adventure, Mystery

Language: English

Characters: OC, Steve H.

Pairings: Steve H./OC

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-11-11 10:33:10

Updated: 2019-11-11 10:33:10

Packaged: 2019-12-12 14:47:12

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 10,733

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: After a career ending injury, Molly Ferris was content to days on her couch watching Knight Rider. Too bad her mother accepting a babysitting job for her at the Wheeler's in November 1983 completely changed her plans. Now she finds herself unwillingly embroiled in the frankly strange events of Hawkins with her dangerously headstrong charges. Steve/OC

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Prologue

I had just officially made the decision that I was never leaving the couch when the phone rang.

I considered retrieving it for a minute, but my mom's footsteps making their way downstairs towards the kitchen quickly ended my internal debate. I settled back even further into the plush couch, watching David Hasselhoff- hands clenched around the odd steering wheel and carrying on a conversation with his car as one does.

"*We're only human, right?*" the car blinked to match his words. How had I never watched this before? This was great.

I of course knew the answer to that question. And my body also seemed keen to remind me as the typical smolder in my ankle transformed into a brief spark that shot up my entire right leg. I grimaced but forced myself to ride it out, focusing back on the television to distract me.

"*Don't push your luck.*" Hasselhoff shot back before the car was bursting out of a building, music swelling behind them. The spark eventually dulled as things seemed heat up-Hasselhoff exiting the car, gun drawn at a group of obvious criminals.

But my mother had one of those voices that seemed to carry to every room of the house, especially when she was on the phone. She didn't seem to understand that her voice carried through the phone to whomever she was talking to, talking like it had to travel all that distance unassisted. "Oh, I'm so glad you called, Karen! It's been too long!"

I rolled my eyes and muttered under my breath, "Awesome." If Karen Wheeler was calling then I could expect this conversation to last a while. I would get to hear a whole recap over the dinner table despite very clearly hearing the melodrama now. Plus, it also meant that I

was going to have to listen my mom drone endlessly on and on about how much progress I had made and how proud of me she was for everything I was working through. Which was complete and utter bullshit considering she had just yelled at me an hour prior for parking myself on the couch all day.

"Oh, she's doing great. I'm honestly so proud of how much progress she's made. Let me tell you, I would never wish this experience on my worst enemy. It's been hard on all of us."

I grabbed the remote and cranked the volume higher- hoping to give her a hint about her current volume. Hasselhoff was now slapping a pair of handcuffs on our perpetrator with a dazzling smile. I managed to drown out my mom for the rest of the episode as things winded down with Hasselhoff and the car trading remarks before driving off into the sunset for their next case. I managed to get a minute or two into the next episode when my mother stepped into the room.

Time had been extremely kind to my mom. Well, time and the fact that she'd never had to work a day in her life. People still sometimes mistook us as sisters to her never ending delight. It was her favorite compliment to receive. There wasn't a wrinkle on her face as she crossed her arms and gave a hard stare. She was even working in a raised eyebrow for added guilt.

I huffed and turned the volume down. "What?"

The frown shifted gracefully into a smile. And it wasn't just any smile. It was the smile she usually reserved for when we were entertaining my dad's business partners and other fancy guests. Which meant I was in pretty big trouble. "Karen Wheeler just called."

"I never would have guessed."

The fact my comment didn't diminish the smile at all officially put me on edge. "She's doing great these days. But... she happened to mention to me that she had a few errands to run this afternoon. And she had apparently promised Mike- you remember Mike- that he could have his friends over to play their little board game today. Normally she would just have Nancy keep an eye on them but she's out studying with a friend."

I let my head fall back into the plush fabric of the couch with a groan. "Mom, tell me you didn't. Please."

"I merely suggested that you had no plans for the day. And her offer was very generous since it was so last minute. It'll only be for a few hours into the afternoon. You were actually the first person she thought of."

Likely because she pitied me like everyone else in this small in every respect town.

My ankle spasmed again and I grit my teeth as I reached down to massage it. "Listen, it was really nice of her to think of me... but I'm just not feeling up for it today. It's been giving me a lot of trouble today and I just think it would probably be best if I hang out here. Maybe next time."

The smile faded which shouldn't have scared me as much as it did. I just needed to stand my ground and continue to play on her sympathies. "Mom. Please. I just... it's too much. I'm just not ready yet."

She took a long moment before answering. "Molly ... it has been a very long four months. I think we can both agree on that." I nodded, looking as pathetic as possible. "And I feel like your father and I have done our best to be patient as supportive of you as we can."

"You have," I offered sweetly. "You really have." Looks like I wasn't going anywhere.

"But I think I'm about at the end of my wits." Wait. What? "You finished physical therapy three weeks ago and I haven't seen you do anything outside sit on this couch and go to school. And that's only after I nearly force you out the door."

I tried to recover. "I don't know what to say, Mom. It's been hard."

She now made her way over to me and took the vacant spot on the couch. "I know. I do. It has been a huge adjustment for you. But I think it might be for the best you stop dwelling so much in what you lost and start occupying your time with something new."

My frustration was definitely rising. "What? Something new like babysitting Mike Wheeler and his friends? No thanks. I'd rather never walk again at that point."

All warmth my mom had instantly faded as I realized my mistake. "You're going." There was no room for debate with the tone she had now.

It didn't stop me from trying. "No. I'm not."

"Molly Jean Ferris, you had best go upstairs and get ready because I am leaving for the Wheeler's in twenty minutes. And you are going to be in the car with me." I went to speak again when she rose a finger. "Otherwise, I might just have to call your father and see how he feels about all this. I have a feeling he'd have a few words to add. And maybe even an allowance to consider removing."

Instead of answering I rose and stormed up the stairs, slamming my door shut as loud as I could. I leaned against the door and stared at the gorgeous smiling face of my future husband Tom Cruise warmly greeting me from my bedroom wall. "Can you believe her?!" I made my way to my large vanity and ran a brush through my unruly bright red hair. After years of being tamed into delicate buns it had entered full rebellion as I let it grow past my shoulders for probably the first time in my life. "Shipping me off like I'm some kind of Rent-A-Sitter." A freckled nose and green eyes stared back at me and I began digging through the drawers for a suitable outfit to wear out of the house. I got the feeling my pajamas wouldn't be appreciated.

I settled on my last pair of clean jeans and a pink t-shirt, tucking it into the high waist and securing it with a belt. I finished the look off with a loose blue vest before throwing on my shoes. Or rather spending the majority of my time carefully navigating my right foot in so that it was only moderately uncomfortable.

I stood in the mirror one last time, flipping my hair over my shoulders. My eyes drifted to the large amount of gold medals that hung on either side that gleamed as the sunlight hit them. Just a glittering reminder of how badly the last four months of my life had sucked. Sparkling with the dream of a stupid kid. I turned back to my husband's poster with a frown. "Well, she did say it might be time to

move on." And with that I grabbed the bin from under my desk and proceeded to drop them in there one by one before practically throwing the bin back. "There. Consider me moved on."

I made my way down the stairs, a lot slower than walking up, and proceeded to our kitchen. Which in my opinion had been far too large considering my mother basically never cooked anything more complicated than meatloaf. But, like many things in our home, it was all about form over function. It sure looked good to visitors and that was all that mattered.

She was getting her purse together as I leaned against the door frame with folded arms. "You're not seriously driving me there?" She didn't answer, grabbing her car keys from the rack above the counter. I barred her from exiting. "Mom, you can't be serious. I have a perfectly good car complete with matching driver's license."

"I don't know if I should let you with the attitude you've had today. And I don't exactly trust you-"

With a sigh, I pushed the hand with her keys to her side. "Mom, I get it. I'm not winning this one. I'll go to the Wheeler's of my own free will. At least give me the decency of taking my own car there." I grabbed my own keys from the rack. "It's not like I've got anywhere else to go now anyway."

That last comment seemed to be enough to satisfy her. "You might not see it now but I'm just doing what's best for you." She wrapped me in a hug that I somewhat reciprocated. "Have fun at the Wheeler's. Maybe afterwards you can spend some time with Nancy. A little girl-on-girl time. Talk about boys and all that."

I snorted. "Don't push your luck." Nancy Wheeler was one year younger than me and we had probably spoken a maximum of five sentences together since both being in high school. Our mothers had tried a few playdates when we were younger, but it soon became clear I had areas I would much rather focus my time into than pretending to enjoy her tea parties. Not that it was personal- I hadn't much time for anyone up until recently. And boy was my social life paying for it now.

Plus, if the rumors around school were true than the last thing I wanted to hear about were her taste in boys.

I told my mom I loved her while slipping on my jacket and stepped out our front door. As I made my way to my car- a 1982 yellow Camaro my parents had gotten me for my sixteenth birthday- I heard a commotion coming from the front yard next door. I instantly knew who the culprit was and did my best to not even look that way as I unlocked the door.

"Well, what do we have here?!" Shit. I'd been spotted. "Looks to me like the princess decided to escape her tower!"

I rose to face the culprit- staring over the hood of my car to the audience gathered on the Harrington doorway. Tommy Hannigan and Carol Peters were of course curled up on the stairs in a way that should have them arrested for public indecency. And standing next to them was good ole King Steve himself.

Steve Harrington and I had lived next door to each other our entire lives. Which one would think means we had a lot of history with one another- that we went way back. But honestly that wasn't true at all. Since I was little, I had done my best to avoid him for a multitude of reasons. The first involved the fact that I was a very shy kid who didn't talk to just about anybody without coaxing- especially not boys. And by the time I had gotten over that I was deep into training with Anna at the rink which meant I never had any time to strike up a conversation. Not that I had a desire to based on his attitude and social standing these days. I sought to avoid drama at all costs and Steve Harrington seemed to be the very center of it since he had formed an alliance with Tommy and Carol. Hence why even when I was no longer busy, I still did my best to avoid him both here and at school at all cost. I didn't have the energy to be sucked into his suffocating orbit.

"At least I have somewhere to be," I shot back. "Beats hanging out on a doorstep in September."

Tommy and Carol proceeded to make some over-the-top noises at my comment- I'm pretty sure I heard hissing like a cat- before breaking out into laughter that Steve joined. I merely rolled my eyes and went

to get my afternoon over with. They weren't worth any more effort on my part.

"I just hate to see it," Carol said loud enough that her voice reached me. "Washed up at sixteen with no hope for her future. I honestly just feel sorry for her. Plus... good luck getting a man with that limp."

I felt my cheeks flare despite myself as my anger and embarrassment both hit me like a wave. But I knew that was exactly what she had been hoping for. Carol was absurdly spiteful like that and always had been. In fact, when my mom had first laid eyes on her she told me to avoid her because 'girls like that... they're going to do nothing but make you miserable'. She had pegged Carol at age six and been proven absolutely correct.

I dared cast one more glance that way despite myself as the laughing got louder. Carol and Tommy were like a pair of hyenas spurring each other on as they somehow coiled tighter together. Steve on the other hand was chuckling a bit while mostly just staring at me. In a way that almost made him almost seem apologetic for what was occurring on his front lawn.

I did the only logical thing and flipped him off before officially climbing into my car.

Letting out a deep breath once I started the car, I met my gaze in the rearview mirror. "Don't listen to her. The limp is basically gone at this point." Except when a lot of walking was involved but no use dwelling on that now. I had kids I needed to supervise. "She's just full of bullshit." I made sure I didn't even look their way as I drove past.

Like I said, I wasn't letting myself get sucked into Steve Harrington's orbit.

I had barely knocked when Mrs. Wheeler threw the door open, her youngest kid balanced precariously on her hip. Shouting was echoing from the living room and she looked to be at her wit's end. But upon seeing me her face lit up in a smile that I swear brightened the entryway. "Molly! Come in. Come in." She took a step back and I followed her into the entryway of the house. "Thank you so much for coming last minute. Something just came up and I hated

disappointing Mike and all his friends."

"It was no problem," I assured her, sliding off my jacket with a large 'show' smile of my own. "I'm honestly trying to get out more now that I'm done with physical therapy." She gestured to the closet for me to hang my coat up as the shouting grew louder- voices mixing together into a cacophony.

"Boys! Enough!" Mrs. Wheeler shouted before turning back to me. "Well, I can't thank you enough. It should only be for a few hours at the most. The boys haven't had lunch yet so maybe you can just make sure they don't burn the kitchen down?"

"Of course."

"Great. Come meet the boys and then I'll head out if that's okay." She led me into their living room where three kids were practically rolling around on the ground while a fourth watched bemused by the antics. "Boys!" she snapped again, causing all of them to stop and look up at her. "This is Molly. She's going to keep an eye on you while I'm out. Anything she says goes, okay?" She turned her attention back to me as I received the force of all of their attention. "Molly, this is Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will."

Only one of them waved at me- one with dark curly hair and a hat perched atop his head. I decided right then and there that he was my favorite of the lot. "Hello," I tried, giving a wave myself. "Nice to meet all of you." The only one I recognized was Mike who had the same frown etched on his face despite being a number of years older than when I last saw him.

The boys returned to whatever the hell they were doing as Mrs. Wheeler gave me a few more instructions about telephone numbers and fire extinguishers. And just like that she was out the door- the room becoming quiet again as the four middle schoolers were clearly sizing me up.

"What?" I questioned, looking to move past them so I could have a seat on the couch. My ankle was starting to twinge a bit from just standing here in the entryway. But here they stood like a solid wall all looking at me like they were waiting for something to happen.

The boy with darker skin in a green and yellow jersey spoke up, hands moving emphatically as he talked. "We're just waiting for the speech." I just shook my head when he waited for me to respond, lost. "The speech?!"

"The one every babysitter gives," Mike cut in.

The small boy in a flannel shirt spoke up quietly. "Where you tell us what we can and can't do."

Mike nodded. "Threaten our lives."

"That speech," the one with the hat concluded, lisp present in his voice that did little to hamper his enthusiasm. "So... let's get it over with."

Then they went back to staring, simply waiting while I tried to come up with something official and authoritative to say. Something that would keep these kids off my back for a few hours. Maybe I could go with the threat? But I didn't want to make it look like I was such an amateur at this that I needed their guidance. If they smelled fear and indecision, I was sure I wasn't going to make it out of this alive. I just needed to convince them to respect me for a few hours until I could bolt and get back to more important things- like my new favorite show Knight Rider.

"Have you ever done this before?" Mike questioned with narrowed eyebrows and way too much sass. I clearly had taken too much time. "Because it doesn't seem like you have."

Honesty. Honesty was always the best policy. "I haven't," I admitted with a shrug of my shoulders. "But I'm also not stupid. Just don't do anything stupid and you get to play your game or whatever without issue. I can give your mom a report that you all were perfect angels. Do something stupid and then we can do things the hard way on all fronts. Your choice."

They all looked at one another, clearly conspiring, when Mike stepped forward. He was clearly the leader of the group. "Or you could do what we say otherwise I break something and tell my mom it happened because you weren't keeping an eye on us."

Oh, he wanted to play. I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes in one of my more intense faces. "Or I tell her how I warned you but you just didn't listen to me because you thought you knew better than the adult here." The others seemed impressed, but Mike wasn't giving me an inch. "You guys go play your game and I sit in the same room reading without bothering you."

"No," he disagreed. "You stay up here while we're in the basement. It's off limits." Like I trusted the four of them down there by themselves. But I was getting the feeling this was going to be a tough sell for the group of them. Unfortunately, if I wanted my afternoon to go smoothly, I was going to have to sweeten the deal. Which meant more work for me, but hopefully less of a headache.

"I go in the basement with you guys and I make lunch for all of you." This seemed to create some debate as they all whispered to one another while I watched on with a smug expression. I knew I had them.

"Fine," Lucas agreed. "But only if it's mac and cheese."

I shook my head. "Peanut butter sandwiches." They went back to whisper again. "Final offer. Take it or leave it."

They whispered for another moment before Dustin stepped forward with his hands extended. "Cut off the crusts and we have a deal." Of course. I debated whether I wanted the extra work but figured I might as well take it before they came up with something else. I shook his hand. "Awesome," he smiled.

"Great. Now let's head into the basement. The sooner we get started the sooner we finish." My ankle was starting to throb at this point.

"Wait. We're hungry now though."

I gave Dustin a look. "Seriously?" He nodded as did the other boys when my eyes drifted over each of them.

Will was the last. "Please."

I let out a huff and without a word made my way to the kitchen with the boys very annoyingly at my heels. I just had to get through this

and then the rest of the afternoon would be a breeze. I could sit for a few hours and enjoy some of the magazines I had seen by the television. Then it would all be over. My mom would be satisfied with my efforts and I could watch more *Knight Rider*. Just a few sandwiches.

I was spreading peanut butter on one of the pieces of bread, grumbling to myself about how I was never having children, when I felt it. I had been standing for an extended period of time and had honestly forgotten for a moment that these days my ankle wasn't the biggest fan of that. So one moment I was silently cussing in my head because Lord knows I wasn't giving them anything to hold over me and the next I felt my ankle give way from under me and I was hurtling towards the tile of the Wheeler kitchen.

There was an instant cacophony of shouting and yelling before I noticed I hadn't hit the floor. I turned to see all four of my charges had propped me up to various degrees to prevent me from hitting the ground. Mike held my shoulder, Lucas my back, Will had latched onto a hip and Dustin was actually on his knees pushing me up by my leg. I honestly was impressed by the sheer coordination of it all. I looked like the flag those soldiers were hoisting up in that famous picture all over our history books.

I heard a grunt and it was enough to bring me back to the present. I swung forward so they were no longer forced to support me, arms finding purchase in the sink so I could lean all my body weight forward. The boys quickly backed off as I pushed myself up so my right leg was bent in the air behind me. I grimaced at the pain shooting up my leg- heart pounding in my ears. It was only once that seemed to be under control and faded that I heard the commotion taking place to my right.

"Molly, I said what the shit just happened?!" Mike was shouting at me.

"Maybe we should call your mom," Will suggested nervously.

"We should call 911," Dustin disagreed. Lucas slapped him on the arm.

"She's not dying!"

Dustin gave him a glare. "Oh, are you a doctor? We don't know that for sure. Last thing we need to do is kill our babysitter."

Mike was making his way towards the phone. "I'm calling my mom."

"Maybe it's a girl thing," Lucas threw out there. "Has this ever happened to Nancy before?"

"Hey!" I shouted loudly, gaining their attention. I spun around so I was facing them and pointed at Mike. "Don't call your mom. I'm fine." He gave me a look of complete disbelief as I leaned back against the counter on one foot. "I'm fine. I just... I need to take a break from standing on my right foot. Then I'll be right back to your sandwiches."

Mike rolled his eyes. I have to say I was starting to get fed up with this kid's sass pretty quick. "Yeah. That sounds completely normal."

"So you're not going to die?" Dustin asked. He looked on edge as if he was expecting me to fall again any second now and needed to be ready to spring into action.

"No. I'm not dying. I just need a moment and everything will be back to normal. My ankle just gave out is all. It's kind of a normal thing with me at this point." None of the boys seemed comforted despite my efforts. Mike looked like he was still about to pick up the phone.

Will spoke up again after a moment of silence, clearly still concerned. "Why is that normal for you?" At least one of these kids had a heart. Though, they all did just come running in to save me from breaking my nose and getting blood all over the nice linoleum.

And maybe it was for that reason that I simply admitted the truth I usually took every opportunity to avoid. "I hurt my ankle about four months ago and it's still not completely healed yet. Sometimes if I've been standing too long it just... stops being able to hold me up. That's all."

"How did you hurt it?" Lucas inquired curiously.

I suddenly felt like I was thrown back into the moment, watching in slow motion as my jump was just off enough to send me sprawling onto the ice. But I forced myself to remain in the present and focused on the brats in front of me who looked ready to run for the phone again as I'm sure I went a bit paler. "Ice skating. I landed wrong during a competition and fell."

Mike looked skeptical. "You fell four months ago and your ankle still hurts?"

My lips pursed as I was honestly a little insulted at the disbelief coming from this kid's mouth. "Yeah. It tends to do that when you fracture it and then have to go into a surgery to have it fixed. But sometimes the surgery doesn't work and you're just lucky you can even walk at all! So yes, four months later and it still ends up being more annoying than you guys. Which is a big achievement let me tell you!"

That seemed to shut them all up, the four of them looking down. Shit. Less than an hour as an authority figure and I had already screwed everything up. I just had to make it about myself, didn't I? Throw my baggage at a bunch of kids who didn't even know me. I was clearly the literal worst at this and could chalk communication up as another skill I had failed to obtain while I wasted my life on the ice rink. The silence continued to stretch on and I just started to feel the knot in my stomach twist even more. "Listen..."

"But if it's not better... when do you get to skate again?" Will finally spoke up, sounding so sad it honestly cut right through me for a moment. And part of me was tempted to just change the subject or finish the sandwiches and throw them at the group to distract them. But I could sense he was being genuine with me right now and felt the least I could do was honor that with honesty.

I didn't sugarcoat it. "Honestly, the doctors don't know. They think eventually I'll be able to go back on the ice again." They all seemed to lift up a bit at this and I almost didn't finish the thought. But some part of me felt like I owed it to them. "But I'm never going to get back to the point I can compete again."

"But you were in competitions," Dustin objected as if that fact meant

my statement couldn't be true. "That means you were good right?"

That actually got a smile out of me and I dramatically dusted off my shoulder. "I hate to brag, but I was awesome." That managed to pick the mood up a bit, Mike once more resuming his exasperated expression while Lucas nodded his head almost with pride. "And I have the medals to prove it."

My ankle had settled enough that I tentatively placed it back on the tile to test it. When it didn't completely rebel and I felt only the slightest twinge I finally let go of my grip on the counter to stand upright once again. "And there we are. Everything's fine. Now let me finish these sandwiches before you guys decide to start a revolt." I returned to spreading peanut butter on the bread with significantly less anger than previously exhibited. These guys were maybe not the worst kids ever I suppose. They had listened which was more than I could say for anyone at Hawkins High.

I finished assembling the last of the sandwiches while the group of them whispered in a cluster behind me... obviously about me. I decided their early behavior earned them a pass on calling them out on it though. "Alright. Everybody to the table. I'm not cleaning up any surfaces in this house we can prevent getting crumbs on." They all rushed to their clearly assigned spots at the Wheeler family table in the dining room, fanning out so they had more than enough room as I distributed a plate to each kid.

Dustin was last and he took the opportunity while I was next to him to speak up. "So, what do you do now?"

Wasn't that the million-dollar question. I had gone through several phases when it came to this one. Optimistic. Hopeless. Anxious. Flat out depressed. But I provided my most recent line of thinking... the one I'd had since I finished Physical Therapy and determined the best place for me was on the couch at home. "I honestly don't know. It turns out when you spend a lot of time on one thing that doesn't work out it really makes all the things you missed out on more obvious."

"Like what?" Lucas asked, mouth full of sandwich. I was honestly surprised I still had all of their attention, especially now that they

had what they wanted from me. But they all continued to focus on me in a way that made it clear they were listening to what I was saying.

I shrugged, suddenly on the spot with too many options to pick from. "Like..." I went with the first thing that popped into my head. "Like having friends." Wow. Way to pick the thing to bring the entire mood of the room down. "I mean..." Well, I hadn't lied to them so far. I wasn't about to start now. "Yeah. Like having friends."

"We can be your friends!" Will instantly tried to cheer me up. I didn't miss the baffled look Mike gave him on that one.

"Thanks, but I think I might choose having no friends over having a bunch of kids like yourselves."

A silence fell over the room again, but this one felt a lot shaper than any of the ones before had. Dustin chewed a bit of his sandwich, staring at it when he spoke next. "We don't have a lot of friends either."

And just like that I felt like someone had punched me in the gut. All four of them looked pretty pathetic and I instantly regretted what I had said. It honestly seemed like I had hurt their feelings in a way I hadn't intended at all- once again proving I knew nothing about children in the slightest. But I understood what they were feeling. I had said something that made it seem like I was just like every other person. Just when they were maybe starting to think differently.

I had to fix this.

They didn't deserve to feel this crappy about something a washed-up teenager had said to them without thinking.

I opened my mouth to say that when I stopped.

Actions spoke louder than words though my mom always said.

Which is why I made my way back to the kitchen with the quiet talk resuming once I had stepped through the doorway. I emerged back into the dining room a moment later with my own plate in one hand and stepped up beside Will. "Scoot over. You guys are hogging the

entire thing. You're too scrawny to need this much room." Wordlessly they all moved in a bit and I took the space that had opened up. I threw napkins into the middle of the table with my other hand. "And take one of those."

They all did and soon a much more upbeat conversation started up as we all ate our lunch. They seemed to realize what I was doing and didn't hesitate in accepting the gesture. I mostly just sat on the sidelines completely unable to keep up with the speed at which the four seemed to bounce off one another. It seemed to be something about the game they were supposed to play. They were all trying to get information out of Mike who was bragging about how much work he had put into it.

It wasn't the worst way to spend a meal. I might even be willing to admit it was better than a sandwich on the couch with my new favorite show on. Though I'd never admit that to them. And maybe they weren't the absolute terrors I had judged them to be. They were probably leagues ahead of any of the immature kids I went to school with. My mind still remembered what Carol had said as I made my way to the car. They certainly weren't the first or the last. And maybe... maybe it was nice to not just be alone for once even if it was with a bunch of kids.

Which is why rather than sit upstairs with a magazine from the coffee table once lunch was finished, I instead followed the others into the depths of the Wheeler basement. I perched myself on one of the old couches in the corner as they all set up their game at the table. I was honestly enjoying the fact that my reading wasn't swallowed in silence but in the excited voices that filled the background. Even if I had no idea what they were saying and Mike was the one doing most of the talking.

I was deep in an article comparing nail polish brands when something one of them said finally registered my attention. "Ask Molly!" I looked up to see Lucas pointing at me with his eye narrowed at an almost insulted Mike.

"Don't be stupid Lucas. She doesn't know the first thing about Dungeons and Dragons."

Lucas crossed his arms, refusing to back down. "But she knows about ice. And she'll be able to tell you that is literally impossible."

"It's magic ice, Lucas. It can do whatever he wants it to," Dustin cut in.

"It still has to obey the basic laws of physics!"

Dustin threw his arms out in exasperation. "Magic. Ice."

Will seemed to be the only neutral party in this argument naturally. "Guys..."

I got the sense however this argument wouldn't be coming to an ending in the near future. So perhaps against my better instincts I rose to my feet and made my way over to the table. It was set up with some sort of board, characters pieces all centered around a tight tunnel it seemed. "Let's hear it."

Mike gave me a look from what appeared to be a seat of power, board in front of him to block whatever he had from view. "We don't need your opinion."

I placed a hand on Lucas's shoulder. "Clearly this one disagrees. So let's just end the argument before it escalates to property damage or bodily harm." Mike turned to Dustin and Will who both just shrugged. I rose a hand in the air with a sigh. "I, Molly Jean Ferris, swear to be a neutral party to this discussion and take my decision seriously. Or may I be torn apart... by a lion."

"A lion?" Will laughed good naturedly.

"First thing I could think of."

All eyes turned back to Mike who after a moment of pure dramatics finally seemed to give in. "Fine. Lucas has just been hit by an ice spell- "

"From around a corner!" Lucas interjected. "He just wants to get sneak attack damage on me so he made the spell turn ninety degrees so it could reach me. He's still mad about me taking out his dumb dog monster in one hit last time."

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes, you clearly are! He's trying to basically knock me down to one hit point with one ball of ice."

"That's the damage I rolled!"

"Guys!" Dustin shouted over the both of them. They continued to glare at one another. "Let's hear what Molly has to say."

I was still processing all the words that had been thrown around like I was supposed to know what they meant. But clearly these guys were not going to give me much more time before the squabbling broke out again. "Okay... so... I call bullshit."

"Thank you!" Lucas exclaimed.

Mike was about to say something but I held my hand up. "Still giving my opinion. One second. As noted, I've spent a lot of time around ice. And it is complete and utter bullshit that Lucas is somehow still conscious from taking a ball of ice to the head." Silence fell over the table as everyone processed my comment. I crossed my arms. "As for the whatever degree turn thing- well it is a magic ice ball. I don't think physics applies." Lucas was looking at me with utter betrayal. "Sorry."

Lucas sputtered for a minute, clearly trying to think of something to counter before finally slumping over so his head was on the table with defeat. Mike on the other hand was actually looking at me with something other than skepticism and narrowed eyes. It almost seemed like... pride. It was kind of weird honestly.

Will patted his shoulder gently. "You are the one who asked for her opinion."

"Yes, he did," Mike resumed control of the game. "Mark the damage on your sheet and then we can keep going now that this is settled. I've got big plans" He met my gaze and I almost fell over when he actually smiled. "Thanks Molly."

"Not a problem. Happy to help," I answered with a salute. My ankle ached a bit and I grabbed Lucas's chair to steady myself for a

moment. I waved off the instantly concerned looks. "Just a twinge. Give me a second and I'll go back over to the couch and my magazine." I looked up to see they were all still staring. "Seriously. Keep playing your game. I'll be good in a second."

Lucas turned back to the piece of paper in front of him and marked something with his pencil. "I take fifty-three points of damage from the ice ball," he said begrudgingly. Mike nodded before returning to his notes. "And as you all process what has just happened... The Ice Queen emerges from around the corner." He slammed a figure onto the table and all the other kids reacted with such shock and disbelief I almost couldn't believe it.

"No!" Dustin shouted, hands going to his hat. "It can't be!"

Will shook his head. "We defeated her. We sent her hurtling down The Chasm of Infinite Sorrow back in The Shifting Territory." Well, that was a completely baffling mouthful. It was enough to send my brain spiraling for a moment.

Lucas slammed the table. "I told you guys we should have made sure!"

"How the hell were we supposed to make sure, Lucas. It's called The Chasm of Infinite Sorrow. Infinite." Dustin snapped at him. "As in goes on forever."

"I know what infinite means!"

"Enough!" Mike gained control of the game again. "You feel it descend upon you- a chill in the air that practically rattles your bones as you stare at her. She looks weaker with torn clothes and a broken arm but then you look in her eyes. You see only icy depths of fury."

I had to admit he was pretty good at this. Even I was getting sucked in a bit as he told this. "And then she says 'You thought you had defeated me!'" Mike hiked his voice up to a falsetto- admittedly not very hard given his current vocal range. It was enough to snap me out of it though and remember just what was going on right now. "But now I return for one thing-revenge!" He picked up his dice but turned his attention to me when I audibly snorted. "Don't you have a

magazine to read?"

I put my hands up to placate him as I backed towards the couch-ankle finally giving me a break and pain dying down. "Sorry. The voice just caught me off guard was all. Please continue." I picked up the magazine as I sat back down. "I return only for revenge," I repeated, giving it my best evil voice as I flipped back to the page I was on.

"Wait! Molly!" I looked up to see Mike pointing at me. "Say that again. But... like... colder."

I raised an eyebrow but complied. "Okay..." I set the magazine down again and leaned forward, summoning every encounter in the locker room with my competitors. "I return... only for revenge," I repeated with the iciest, clipped tone I could manage. The way I heard the other girls say congrats after I beat them for a medal. Or the way they 'complimented' your outfit and hair. Or the way- there was a lot to pull from honestly.

Mike seemed to be debating something for a moment, the other boys just looking between the two of us. Finally, he stood up and pulled another chair to the table next to him. "Get over here." I hesitated and he gave an impatient huff. "Come on."

I made my way back over to the table. "What?"

"You're going to play The Ice Queen," he told me as if it was obvious.

"I am?" I questioned, pretty sure there had been no request anywhere in that last sentence. It seemed like the decision had already been made for me.

"Yeah. Now sit down before your ankle hurts again." And though it was said with a tone that did not impart concern at all I saw right through it. This was Mike being nice. I got the feeling he wasn't very inclusive when it came to this precious game of his, so the fact that he was inviting me now was probably a pretty big deal. I glanced at the other boys and their faces of surprise basically confirmed my suspicions. I was being included. By children, but included nonetheless. For the first time in my incredibly short social life. And,

again despite it being a bunch of demanding kids, it kind of brought a smile to my face.

So, probably despite my better judgement, I took my seat. "What do you want me to say, boss?"

"I don't have a script. Just general angry and revenge things." Mike placed a small pile of dice in front of me. "These are for when you roll your attacks. I'll tell you what to do."

"I get to attack?" They all nodded. "I get to attack you guys." They all nodded and I picked up a dice, evil smile forming on my face. "Hope you guys wrote your wills before you entered this tunnel."

Dustin smiled. "You're right. She's prefect."

And the game continued as I did battle with the enemies that nearly sent me to my doom. "You think and Endless Chasm could defeat me? We shall see if you do something so stupid as underestimate me again?" Soon the spells and attacks were flying- Will healing Lucas before I could finish him unfortunately. I was weak from The Chasm still, but used the burning passion of anger at losing my crown to this band of idiots to propel my magic. Soon I was going completely off script with Mike only watching in something akin to horror as I butchered his story with my ramblings and perhaps a bit of pride at how I was keeping the others on their toes. "My father never wanted me to have the kingdom! I earned it. And you think you can just take that away from me?"

Needless to say, I became invested. The fact that the more I seemed to put into it the more the boys would react was an excellent motivator. I had been a performer my whole life. I grew up living off audience reaction. Having all the attention fixed on me and controlling their every breath as I moved through my routine. Making them feel exactly how I wanted them to feel. Leaving it all out there. And it honestly felt good to be back in the spotlight again with control of a crowd- downsized as it might be compared to what I was used to.

"You will never take away my destiny!" I shouted, rolling one of the large twenty-sided die.

But despite my efforts my character was still weak and soon overwhelmed- on my hands and knees with Dustin's dwarf holding an axe over my head prepared for the finishing blow. As I contemplated my final words, we all heard the basement door open. "Molly?!" Karen Wheeler's voice shouted down.

I quickly rose to my feet, making my way in view of the stairs. "Down here!" She gave me a warm smile from the top- clearly happy to see me in one piece with the house still standing. "Welcome home, Mrs. Wheeler."

She waved a hand at me. "Please. Call me Karen. I've finished all my errands for the day so feel free to make your way up- at your own pace of course." I tried to hide my wince at that offhanded comment. She was just trying to be nice after all. "I can pay you and then you are more than welcome to head out. I really appreciate- "

"She can't leave yet!" I jumped as Mike suddenly appeared next to me- clearly shouting at his mother. "She's an essential character to this part of the campaign. If she went home now it'd ruin everything!"

"Mike!" Karen barked back down to him. "I'm home and Molly's job is done! You can't force her to stay here! She might have other plans for the evening."

"But..." I looked at Mike before my gaze drifted to the table. Will, Lucas and Dustin also were looking pretty downcast at the end of our little adventure and it honestly struck me how in a few hours I had managed to turn this entire situation around. They couldn't wait to get rid of me and now for some reason they didn't want me to go.

And, honestly though I'd never admit it, I really didn't want to go either. I had been having fun and now the thought of driving home to sit on my couch alone didn't have quite the same appeal that it once did. The complete lack of interaction with others was clearly lowering my standards to what would suffice for hanging out. Anyone else my age would be running out of here the second they were clear- especially from this group of troublemakers.

Then again, wasn't like I could run anyway.

"I can stay," I said to myself, almost testing the words. Approving, I spoke them again so everyone could hear. "I can stay. I don't have any plans and I'd hate to ruin the game for them." Mrs. Wheeler looked skeptical in a way that practically mirrored her son.

"Molly, you don't have to- "

I cut in. "I want to," I said perhaps a little too earnestly. I had meant to play it cool and I felt like I wasn't doing that in the slightest right now. I tried to scale back my eagerness so I didn't seem too weird to Mrs. Wheeler. "I don't mind staying. You can just pay me for the time you were gone and I'll head out when my part in this is over. Besides, I don't think I'm quite ready to conquer all the stairs yet," I added at the last moment. Mrs. Wheeler's look became much more sympathetic and I knew I had her. She was not immune to my injury as my mother apparently had become.

"Sure dear. Take as long as you need." She disappeared a moment later and Mike practically shoved me back to my chair muttering about lost atmosphere. I let him deposit me back where we had been and quickly picked things up from where we had been- with an axe to my head. It looks like my part would be finished soon enough.

Mike cast a glance my way as he described that I refused to plead for my life. "Damn straight. I'm a queen after all." Something flickered in his expression as if he was debating something with himself and eventually he paused. I just stared back, raising an eyebrow in question. "And then she offers to make a deal."

"She does?!" the boys reacted with surprise.

I shook my head. "Like hell I do. I go out with dignity."

Mike ignored me. "She tells you that if you spare her life right here then she will be in your debt. She will accompany you through these caverns and help you find what you seek- lending you her remaining power."

He was staring at me now- silently telling me to play my part. I had seen that look many times from my coach in the past when she changed the routine. And much like then I fell right in line. "No.

Wait. I can help you. I will help you if you choose not to end my life here."

Like the heroes they were, I was instantly spared and my offer accepted. Will even cast a small healing spell on me as a peace offering. And thus, my life in this game was extended as I joined them in their journey.

A few hours later, we were interrupted by Mrs. Wheeler shouting down that she had ordered pizza for all of us. I stayed seated at their insistence while they ran up to collect the boxes, grabbing a prime slice as soon as the box was open. "Molly, is your middle name really Jean?" Dustin asked with his mouth full. I politely nodded as I chewed since I wasn't an animal. "That's so cool!"

I swallowed. "It is?"

"Yeah. You've even got red hair just like Jean Gray."

"I have no idea who that is."

Will cut in to help. "She's an X-Men." He could quickly see that didn't help any. "She's a superhero who's got the coolest powers." Ahh, comics. I should have guessed.

"Except for Wolverine," Lucas clearly disagreed.

Will shook his head, smiling at me shyly. "I think she's a lot cooler than Wolverine."

I was about to say something when Mike cut in. "Okay. Break's over. Let's get back into things before we lose the flow of the game."

"Heaven help us," I snorted, earning a glare from him and a giggle from the rest. I decided to give in and shoved the rest of the piece in my mouth, my silence giving Mike the perfect opportunity to launch right back into us proceeding through the cavern.

I was finishing my third slice of pizza, something I could now enjoy since my days of dieting had come to an end, as we entered the second to last room of these caverns. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary according to Lucas's perception when Mike interrupted.

"Wait. Something is coming. Something hungry for blood. A shadow grows on the wall behind you, swallowing you in darkness. It is almost here."

We were all leaning forward at this point. "What is it?" Will asked.

"What if it's the Demogorgon?" Dustin voiced. I had no idea what he meant but it was enough to have Will lean back in his chair nervously. "Oh Jesus, we're so screwed if it's the Demogorgon."

Lucas gestured emphatically. "It's not the Demogorgon."

I rose my hand. "Anyone want to catch me up on what- "

Mike had apparently been patient enough though and slammed a few figures down onto the board. "An army of troglodytes charge into the chamber!"

I looked at the others before leaning in to Dustin. "Is that bad?" He shook his head.

"We could take them in our sleep." He started laughing and soon the other boys had joined. They seemed to be quite relieved by this development so I suppose I should be too. Despite Will healing my character I wasn't in any shape for a large assault- that is, if I wanted her to live of course. Their giggling proved infectious though and soon I was laughing along with them.

"Wait a minute," Mike softly cut into our celebrating, looking to the left. "Did you hear that? That... that sound. Boom... boom... boom!" He slammed the table, making all of us jump. "That didn't come from the troglodytes. No, that... that came from something else."

We were all trading serious glances now- happy mood completely dead. "Well, it's been nice knowing all of you," I gave a mock salute to help cut the tension. It didn't really seem to work though as Mike slammed another piece onto the table.

"The Demogorgon!" The boys groaned as I took in the jet-black piece with two head and spiraling tentacle limbs. I had absolutely no clue what this creature was in the slightest but it did not look like this was going to be a pleasant encounter.

"We're in deep shit," Dustin vocalized what we were all thinking. I even found myself nodding along as I consulted my character sheet. Fifteen health was not a lot and Mike had told me I was basically out of spells at this point.

"Will, your action!" Mike barked before it seemed any of us had any hint of a plan. Will looked absolutely put on the spot-completely unsure what to do.

"I don't know."

"Fireball him!" Lucas suggested- well, more shouted at him.

Will looked at his sheet. "I'd have to roll a thirteen or higher." Now, I hadn't been playing very long but I was passing my math class. So, I knew the odds on that one were definitely not in our favor. I found myself placing my head in my hands as I tried to think of a way around this. I was basically completely engrossed.

"Too risky," Dustin confirmed my thoughts. "Cast a protection spell."

Lucas clearly disagreed. "Don't be a pussy. Fireball him!"

"Cast Protection. Molly won't be able to make it if he hits her."

Mike slammed the table again to get our attention. "The Demogorgon tires of your silly human bickering! It stomps towards you. Boom!" The shouts all started coming on top of each other now and I could barely keep up.

"Fireball him, Will!"

"Another stomp, boom!"

"Cast Protection."

"He roars in anger!"

"Will, you need to do something! We're just sitting ducks right now!" my voice joined in all the others as we started shouting on top of one another.

"Fireball!" Will finally shouted over all our voices as he threw the die with so much force it was sent clattering across the table and over the edge. There was a momentary pause before all the boys were on their feet combing the ground. "Where is it?"

"I don't know." I went to stand and join them, but Dustin pushed my shoulder down from beside me. It was a nice gesture but I wanted to remind them all that I wasn't an invalid.

"Was it a thirteen?" he asked as all the other boys were crawling on the ground.

"I don't know," Will's voiced answered again. Dustin had taken a few steps away from me and was muttering "Oh my God" to himself over and over. I took the opportunity to duck under the table and look myself- combing the carpet for any sign of the die. The commotion continued around me as I searched- hand feeling along the carpet just in case my eyes weren't seeing it.

Mike was soon dragged upstairs by his mom with the news it was time for everyone to head out. I hadn't realized how late it had been getting at all. I still had some homework I need to finish before class tomorrow. Soon after Will rose and caught all of our attention. "Oh, I got it!" Everyone rose to their feet and Dustin offered me a hand. I honestly wanted to refuse it, but knew we were probably looking at a very different end to the evening if I didn't.

"Thanks," I told him warmly and I used his leverage to gently get myself to my feet. Will made his way back over to the table as the other boys started packing up.

He held the dice out to us. "Does a seven count?"

"Did Mike see it?" Lucas questioned. Will shook his head. "Then it doesn't count."

Will seemed unsure of that so I decided to add my mature opinion as the eldest of this group. "Agreed." The boys continued throwing on their jackets and gathering their bags as I made my way to the stairs. I still had to check in with Mrs. Wheeler before I headed out. Plus, I was going to take a bit longer than they were.

I started my climb- hand firmly gripping the railing and desperately trying to ignore how every right step sent pain shooting up my body. It had been a long day it seemed. Mike appeared at the top of the stairs but paused as the boys did at the bottom- letting me have the staircase completely to myself. Part of me was contemplating having a talk with them about how breakable they thought I was but the other part was pretty grateful not to have them running up and down to knock me off balance.

"I would offer you guys a ride home, but I still have homework I need to finish since you kept me so long," I told the basement crew when I was almost at the top. I debated whether to say something else, but the events of the day had definitely softened me on them a bit. "Thanks guys. I had fun."

"Bye Molly," Lucas and Will called up to me.

"Bye Jean Grey," Dustin said instead, earning laughs from the group. I rolled my eyes to myself. I would have to find out if this Jean Grey was really cool or if these punks were messing with me. I'd need to track down a comic book nerd at school tomorrow. Shouldn't be too hard to find.

I made it to the top, standing a moment to make sure my ankle was alright while Mike hovered next to me. "All good," I told him. "Is your mom in the kitchen?" He nodded. "Cool."

I was walking away when I heard him call my name. "Molly." I turned back to him with a questioning expression. "There are no open spots in the party so don't think this you're a permanent addition... but if you wanted to finish the campaign with us next weekend..." He trailed off before shrugging, changing tactics back towards his more usual self. "I mean, from what you've told us you have no life anyway. Plus, it would totally ruin the story I've built now for this campaign if you were just suddenly gone next time."

I smirked. "Well, we can't have that. That would be very selfish of me. I'll take a look at my calendar... which as you so kindly pointed out isn't very full these days." I took a step back towards him. "I honestly had fun. I didn't expect to, but I did- more than I've had in a long time in fact. You're pretty good at this." I then proceeded to

pointedly ruin the moment by ruffling his hair. "Now I will go spend the next week researching what a Demogorgon is so I know how to beat it next weekend."

"Stop!" he shoved my hands away. "Stop!" I laughed and he just glared at me. "As Dungeon Master, I don't have to let you come back."

I headed towards the kitchen with a smile, pointing at myself. "But I'm essential to the story. You said so yourself." He just shook his head at me and hollered the all clear to his friends.

I stopped in with Mrs. Wheeler, having a bit of disagreement over my wages as she offered me a lot more than I'm sure she had agreed on with my mom. Finally, I accepted it though- the two of us glancing around as the light suddenly flickered on and off for a moment.

"Mike invited me back next weekend so I can finish this story with them if that's okay," I told her as she walked me to the door.

She smiled and nodded. "No, that's great. I can run a few errands again and Nancy won't have to worry about being home if she wants to hang out with Barb or something. Honestly, Mike has never liked any babysitter I've had over so this makes me think this could turn into a steady job for you. He's usually chasing them out the door as soon as I'm home."

"Like is a strong word." I wasn't ready to commit to that just yet. I'd just come over for one more weekend and then hopefully my mom would be satisfied enough to get off my case for a while. I could go back to my couch in peace. "But maybe."

With a good night, I made my way to my car and, with a last wave at the boys as I passed them on their bikes, I made my way home. Yes, I could do one more night with them. They weren't completely awful and it's not like that would make us friends or anything. And then it would be thankfully back to normal. I was fine with the way things were now. I was.

Little did I know that with that one afternoon I had unintentionally sealed my fate to things never being normal for me again.